

Getting stoned with Skeletor

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

1987 was a busy year for He-Man, the muscle-ripped Eternian human alter-ego of Prince Adam; the undercover superhero with the worst pre-transformation disguise in the history of superheroism. He starred in his own flopbuster movie, and two computer games for various systems developed and published by separate outfits, only a year after his first foray into the gaming arena by way of a pictorial text adventure.



While 'Masters of the Universe: The Movie' is based on events that took place... now let me think, that's it, in the *movie*, 'Masters of the Universe: The Arcade Game' was inspired by He-Man's cartoon monarchy.



Even so, the 'Ilearth Stone' referred to in the alternative title doesn't appear to emanate from He-Man lore at all. It's possible it was adopted from Stephen R. Donaldson's Chronicles of Thomas Covenant novels, though there it's spelt with a double I, pronounced 'ill earth'. What's odd is that the Eternian macrocosm *does* incorporate an Ilearth Stone equivalent; the 'Star Seed', which could have been embraced for a more authentic vibe.



Falling into the adventure-platforming genre, the arcade entry in the series was published by US Gold, and developed by Adventuresoft, Mike 'Simon the Sorcerer' Woodroffe's studio operated from within Callisto Computers, the home micro shop he once ran in Birmingham.

Americana Software (the budget division of Mastertronic) would later acquire the rights to re-publish the title as a second chance, el cheapo affair, as they tended to do before

US Gold launched their own budget label, known as Kixx. Not just available on Route 66 then. Teehee. Hmm.

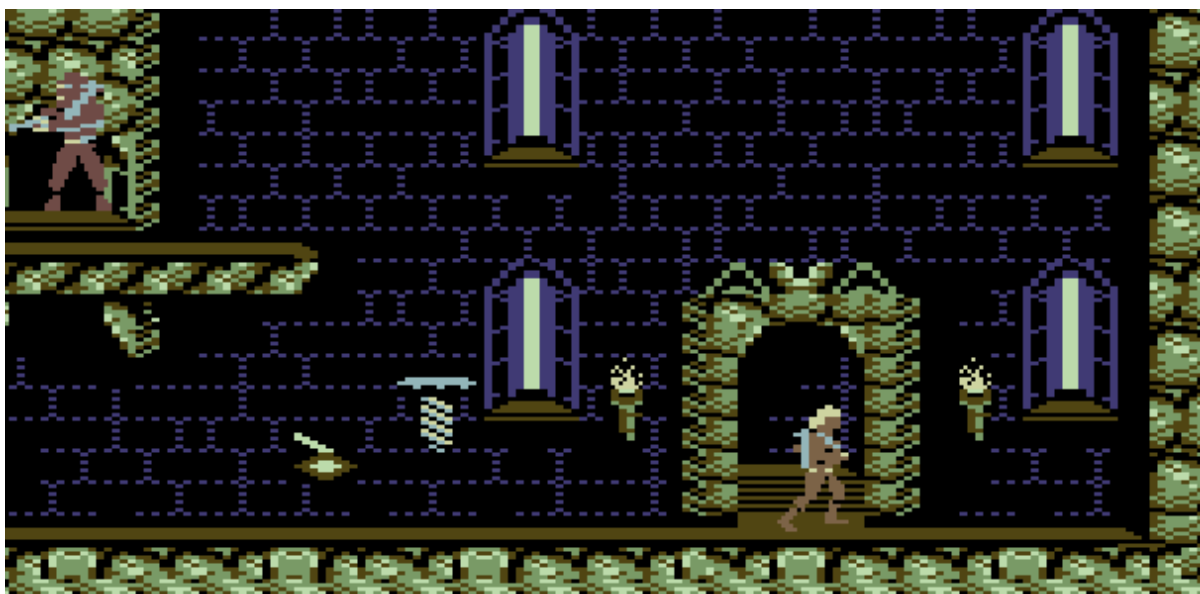
Where the Commodore 64 version is concerned, development duties fell to the cryptic 'A Studio' members AGY, ESZ, GP, and SCH (programming), and the sadly late Stefan Ufnowski (graphics); incidentally the same Stefan who wrote the interactive fiction game 'Masters of the Universe: Super Adventure' a year earlier, also on behalf of Adventuresoft. However, over on the Speccy side of the equation, Mike Woodroffe, Stefan Ufnowski, Graham Lilley, Teoman Irmak, and Ben Daglish took the reins. Strangely for the era, no Amstrad edition was produced, although I can't imagine too many CPC fans lost sleep over the omission.

What with the entire plot and your objective being neatly elucidated on the back of the box I won't waste my time rehashing them in great depth here, save to say that they're principally equivalent to the movie, albeit with switched quest paraphernalia. Crucially, the thing to remember is we're here to rescue the Sorceress, defend Castle Grayskull and defeat our bête noire, Skeletor. You know, the usual good versus evil necromancy shenanigans.

Your HUD this time round is a bit unusual in that it records the number of 'skulls cracked', the current potency of your upgradeable sword and your shield's state of disrepair. The latter allows you to absorb multiple hits until it reaches rock bottom, at which point it's a matter of one more assault and you're a goner. 'Moons til doom' too is a quirky and appropriate way of representing the time you have remaining to complete your task.



You'd think you could take it for granted that He-Man would engage his sword to slay opponents, only in the game of the movie it doesn't occur to him for a second. Here, however, it's your paramount and only weapon, albeit one you can supercharge with blaster projectiles by collecting magic icon power-ups, allowing you to take out enemies from a safe distance.



You're bestowed with four lives with which to fulfil your mission, these mostly being stolen from you through missing pixel-perfect jumps that cause you to stagger backwards into spike pits, water or bushes. The necessity to balance precariously on spinning platforms, and dodge pterodactyls dropping insta-hatch eggs, unleashing slithering, seemingly possessed snakes, certainly doesn't make your life any easier either.



Then the tremendously plodding frame rate of He-Man's motility *does* mean you have plenty of time to think... and wait for the barely scrolling screen to catch up. We jump in slow-motion too, though it's technically more of a frog-like leaning lunge, one that's oddly assigned to two separate keys; one for jumping *left* and another for jumping *right*.

Lending the game a sliver more depth (literally), we're able to walk further into the screen to occupy multiple planes, or enter doorways that lead to unexplored territory. Leaping through teleport mirrors further allows us to navigate the landscape without having to rely on elevators. Although it's hard to imagine Speccy He-Man being able to fit through these tight gaps carrying that massive black border around with him everywhere he goes; clearly a quick and dirty workaround for the notorious Sinclair colour clash issue. Probably the most conspicuous example you'll ever witness.





"The gameplay is non-existent, the graphics are bad, there's no sound and it's badly programmed. In fact, the only thing that Masters of the Universe has going for it is its name... Keep away, this is completely horrid."

"What a pile of rubbish!... The graphics aren't very good, and He-Man himself doesn't look particularly realistic. It's very boring to play, and not much good to look at. I wouldn't recommend it."

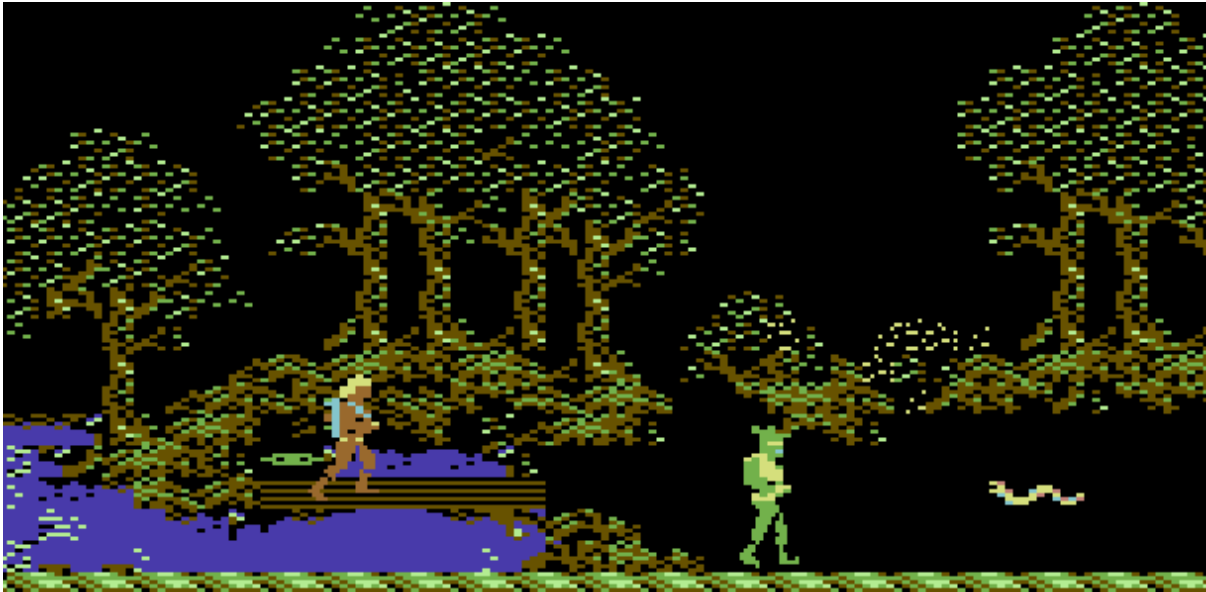
"What has US Gold done this time? This must be one of the worst games to come out of their stable for ages - and it's one of the worst looking games around. There may be a lot of colour on screen, but it's badly constructed and too liberal - and why the hell they've got a big black 'halo' round the main character is beyond me. I found it unplayable, with the collision detection particularly spelling. I found it no fun to play, and there's nothing even slightly addictive to hang on to. I hate to say it, but even the TV series is better than this."

28% - Crash issue 38 (March 1987)



It's a game of three halves, as we Brits like to say when we're being jolly witty; split between Castle Grayskull where you begin, the forest beyond its hulking stone walls and Snake Mountain where you'll find His Royal Bonyness plotting his next volley of villainy.

Oh, wait, no. We're venturing out into the wilderness, traipsing through the overgrowth in a kind of Pitfall-parodying detour to tick off the remaining items on our shopping list, before entering a tiny cottage at the end of the woods. Which somehow leads us right back to the inside of the palace where we started, making it a game of *two* halves and ruining my clever footballing analogy... relevant to He-Man because, because... oh shut up. If you're going to get lippy I'll review MOTU in Terraquake, *and* force you at swordpoint to read it! *Don't* push me, you know I'll do it.



En route you'll face Skeletor's stormtrooper minions, snapping robo-hoovers, and those pernicious aerial threats we covered earlier. If you're suddenly wondering if one of the teleporters accidentally landed us in Renegade III's prehistoric level, ironically two years into the *future* in the gaming timeline, you're not the only one.

Placement of the objects required to formulate Orko's sword-booster spell is entirely random, thereby marginally enhancing the replayability factor. Although within fifteen minutes you'll likely have seen everything the game has to offer anyway, maybe even completing it in the same space of time.

"A weak concept dressed up with a powerful license. It's cheaper and more rewarding to buy the toys and use your imagination, or to watch the TV series."

"The most ridiculous thing of all is that fans of the TV series will probably rush out in their thousands and buy it without even looking at it..."

"This isn't exactly a complete waste of a license, as I can see it appealing to fans of the toys. But as a game in its own right - forget it."

"The more perseverant amongst you may find a decent challenge in this; I found it a chore."

44% - Zzap! issue 26 (June 1987)

Music isn't up to the standard of Ben Dalglish's work in the rival MOTU game, but what little of it there is, is superb. It's such a shame the seven-second, perfectly accurate rendition of the cartoon's theme tune loops almost incessantly throughout the game because it'll soon drive you up the wall... over it and hurling yourself into Castle Grayskull's unexpectedly enticing moat.

"Masters of the universe is initially a nice game. But, if like me, you are suspicious of the word 'nice', you'd be right. A 'nice' game in this case is a fun but rather average arcade-adventure, pretty graphics and a good rendition of the He-Man theme tune. I'll have to pass this one off as a game for fans of the average arcade-adventure and He-Man freaks. It isn't bad, but the slow and fidgety gameplay means that as tanned and muscular as he may be, He-Man just doesn't have the power."

60% - Commodore User (April 1987)

Tracking down Orko in one of the castle towers you rescue him from his self-imposed prison, and hand over the magic ingredients he requires to baptise your puny sword, making you a far more worthy opponent in time for the Battle Royale.

With your sword wholly augmented you strike down Skeletor with a single blow and with that, the game is cut as abruptly

short as his existence. There's no congratulations screen to indicate we accomplished our mission, nothing at all, diddly squat. It may have crashed for all we really know for sure.

All we have to go on is the sudden emergence of the word 'captured' under the words 'body shield' in the HUD, alluding to Skeletor having been apprehended rather than nuked. Which would make sense seeing as He-Man et al never kill anything sentient in the cartoon or the movie because Mattel didn't approve of gratuitous violence. Anyone hoping to use the potentially lucrative license would have to adhere to their stipulations, as Cannon Films discovered to their detriment when trying to direct convincingly treacherous action sequences for the MOTU movie. They couldn't keep flinging baddies into mud baths to dispatch them *and* keep a straight face.

As for the Ilearnth Stone, did we torpedo that or not? I really can't tell. It all happened too fast, as illogical as that may sound considering what a sloth of a title this is. You'd hope so because it's the source of Skeletor's "invincible magical strength" if the game's box is to be trusted. If we're just going to polish it up a bit and stick it in a velvet-lined presentation box to be displayed on the mantelpiece, we may as well give Skeletor the keys to the kingdom now and let him run amok.

When Oskar Schindler taught us that "power is when you have every justification to kill someone, and then you don't", I wonder if he was operating in cahoots with Mattel. You see the problem with being "The Most Powerful Man in the Universe" is that you could in theory crush Skeletor like a bug at the end of the pilot episode, yet then you'd have an extremely short-lived franchise on your hands and have to resort to selling Barbie dolls to boys. I was always more of a Cindy guy myself.